Where the Soviet Pot Bubbles and Boils

The Russian People's House on East Fifteenth St.—A Place of Color and Mystery

By Louis Kantor

WHEN the Soviet demonstration on lower Fifth Avenue on Wednesday, October 8, was brought to a dramatic climax by the clash between the mounted police and the Russian aliens of revolutionary tendencies who took part in the parade it was very plainly hinted by the police and the prosecuting attorney that their belief was that the whole affair had been originally planned in and had emanated from the Russian People's House, situated at 133 East Fifteenth Street.

It was not the first time that this Russian People's House had received the inquisitive attention of the police and Federal Secret Service—the last notable instance being the time of the sending of dangerous bombs—but with all the attention it receives no one, not even radicals, seemed to be cognizant of what went on within its walls.

The natural question then was: What is the Russian People's House and who controls it?

One day last week the writer journeyed to Fifteenth Street to ascertain, if possible, the answer to that question, and found the Russian People's House to be an ill-kept building, containing the office of "Workman and Peasant," a Russian revolutionary daily; a cooperative school maintained and controlled solely by the pupils through their "soviet"; a cheap—both in price and content—cafeteria and a large social room in which members of the local unions in the Russian Federation of Workers—the organization apparently in active charge of the whole building—spend their off hours. Since all who were questioned admitted that no one person, or set of persons, has exclusive authority in the building, it was quite impossible to learn whether the property is owned or only leased. It may be said with a fair degree of certainty, however, that the officials in control of "Workman and Peasant" are also in control of the building. These officials are M. Korneeff, president, and S. A. Youmshanoff, treasurer.

Ramshackle

The house itself is an inconspicuous, ramshackle, four-story affair and stands opposite the huge Edison Company building on the same street. The dirty stone steps are dusty and unswept; the entrance hall is incomparably filthy, as is the remainder of the building; the air within is smelly and close, and the light exceedingly poor.

Suspicious glances greeted the writer as he entered a long, barren, barnlike room immediately adjoining the entrance hall. A number of camp chairs were scattered carelessly through the room, on which sprawled roughly clad men, one of whom was snoring; and in the corner a very worn upright piano at which sat a large, bony Russian solemnly pounding out a funereal Slavic melody.

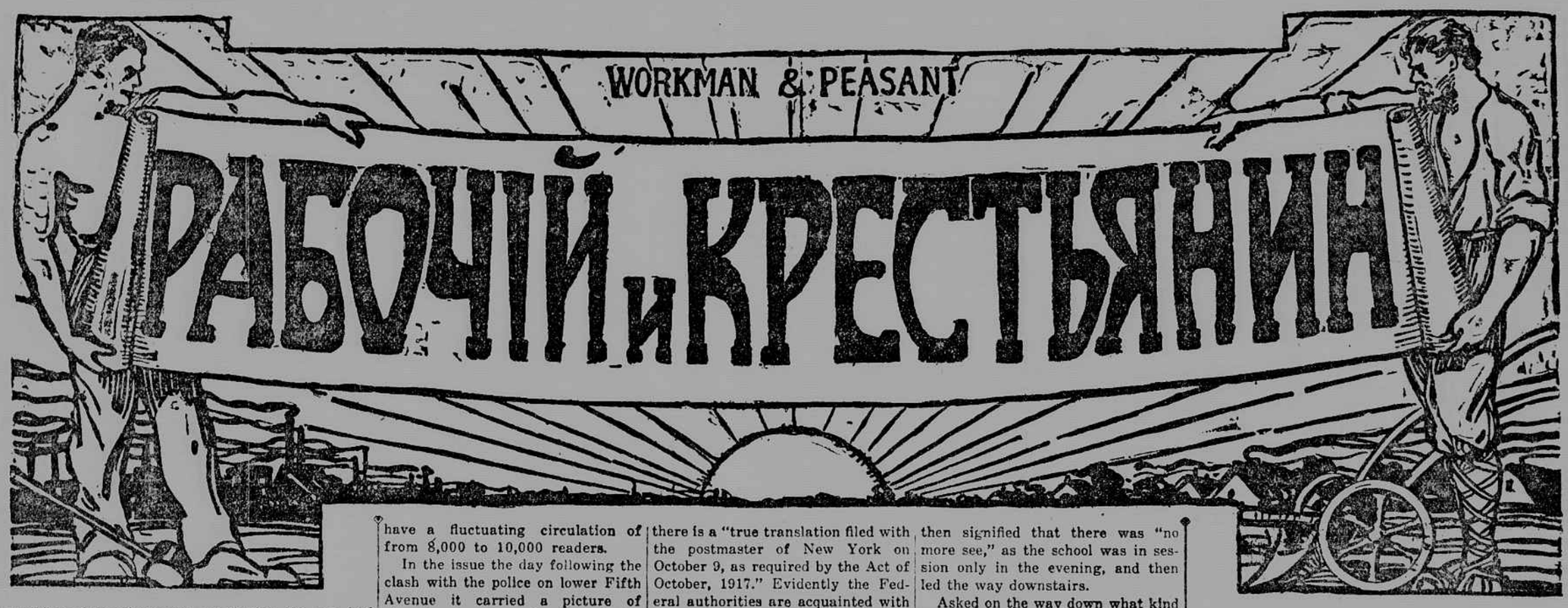
"Tavarisch?" demanded a slight, baldheaded fellow who darted quickly toward the writer with suspicion.

The writer explained that he was not a "tavarisch," which is Russian for comrade, and that he just wanted to find out what sort of place the Russian People's House is. The man looked blankly about him for a moment, and then motioned to a tall, swarthy fellow who had been watching curiously. A whispered consultation was held by the two in Russian, the word "bourgeoisie" being frequently spoken by them. The writer was evidently suspected of being an enemy of the "proletariat."

"I spik English," announced the tall fellow finally. "What you want?"

He was told, and, as a gracious grin slowly spread over his face, the man said that he would be glad to show the "comrade" around the house. Just then a noise arose toward the front of the room, and one of a group of five men who had been sitting and talking together got up, and, accompanied unconsciously on the piano by the musician, who had played all the while, declaimed dramatically in Russian. The voluntary guide and translator was asked what the man had said when he finished.

"He say," said this Russian in tortured English, "this no free country, 'cause man he can no say what he think. He say police they rotten why they break parade up and hit with clubs."



Tea

Mopping his face, which was perspiring very freely from the effort which his speech apparently entailed, he led the way into a small room filled with small tables around which sat some fifteen or twenty men eating cheesecake and drinking tea. A fat, stolid looking fellow sat at the far end of the room behind a large, rough table, on which were grouped in an attempt at artistry various species of doubtful cake and cigarettes. He refused to talk, but motioned significantly to his wares. Asked a number of questions, he refused to answer, except to say in guttural tones: "Dunno," "dunno."

"He what you call stupid," said the writer's guide, "he only know eat."

The men at the tables were clad in shabby clothes and wore their hats, usually awry, on their heads, and conversed in loud tones. One fellow, a type found usually in the books of the famous Russian novelist, Maxim Gorky, was, according to the guide, telling tales of his "hoboing" experiences and sneering at the city people. The others listened intently, never missing a word; and the looks of awe and wonderment on their faces as the "hobo," between bites of cake and long sips of tea, told of his travels, were more than amusing.

On the second and third floors the guide showed the writer the classroom in which the "tavarischi" received their schooling, and the office of "Workman and Peasant," which was, just now, quite deserted. This paper, the writer learned, is a new propagandist sheet, extremely radical in its contents and said to have a fluctuating circulation of from 8,000 to 10,000 readers.

In the issue the day following the clash with the police on lower Fifth Avenue it carried a picture of the Russians parading up Fifth Avenue, and a leader in which the police were compared with the Cossacks of the old czaristic régime in Russia. At its head, printed in English, runs the assurance that there is a "true translation filed with the postmaster of New York on October 9, as required by the Act of October, 1917." Evidently the Federal authorities are acquainted with its contents.

On the fourth floor are a few rooms used for storage purposes—books and pamphlets—also as the offices of the federation. These were vacant at the time, and the guide then signified that there was "no more see," as the school was in session only in the evening, and then led the way downstairs.

Asked on the way down what kind of school it was, he said: "Good school—Soviet run—very cheap." And much more impossible of transcription, for English letters are incapable of transcribing his language. He kindly showed me the way out—the pianist was still playing—and invited me to call later in the evening to see the school in operation.

School

About 7 o'clock that evening the writer returned to see the school in session. He approached a teacher who would give no other name than Bernstein. Bernstein consented to explain its workings. He said that there are about 150 students, some of whom are women, and that the school is open five nights in the week from 7 to 10 o'clock. The pupils pay 10 cents a lesson. The lesson lasts an hour, and the teachers, four in number, are paid $1.50 an hour. The pupils elect a committee of three, who supervise the school in general, but, since elections are held every two weeks, their authority is short-lived. The teachers have no authority, and are "invited" by the students to teach. There are four classes in all, and the most elementary subjects are taught. Bernstein explained that there are no entrance requirements, as most of these men are illiterate, and that the two subjects generally taught are the reading and writing of Russian, and simple arithmetic. Advanced students are taught a little geometry and algebra, sometimes elementary history and literature, and "even culture."

"This is a democratic school," said Bernstein seriously, "and the pupils are taught what they want to learn. When ten pupils decide that they want to learn a certain subject, let us say history, we get a teacher for them. That's how it works in this school—the pupils decide for themselves and are not dependent in this regard upon their teachers."

Why Russian?

Bernstein was asked why the anxiety of these men, most of whom are over twenty-five years old, to learn Russian in these days when Americanization is the order of the day and in a country where it is not spoken.

"Because," he explained, "they intend to go back to Russia when the blockade is lifted. They want to be prepared so that they will not have any difficulty getting into the swing of things when they get there. You see, although they speak Russian, they can neither read nor write it, and they want to be prepared."

"It is said that anarchism and similar doctrines are taught in the school—is that true?" he was asked.

"It's not," he replied quickly. "This is a non-partisan school, and these men are not anarchists. These men may hold certain political beliefs, but they do not get them here. Most of them are machinists who work all day and sacrifice their nights to the study of their native tongue."

The writer was invited to visit a few of the classrooms. The rooms are very small and low ceilinged, filled with long, low and very worn benches. On the benches sat the students, closely squeezed together, with their hats tightly drawn over their heads, listening eagerly to the teacher. At the front of the room stood the teacher, explaining the lesson slowly in Russian. Now and then one of the students would rise and debate with the teacher as to the accuracy of his explanation—in this case it was a mathematical problem—but he was hushed by the others, who would glare angrily at him for interrupting. Often they would be called to the chalked-up blackboard to demonstrate a problem in simple mathematics, and, though some went readily, the majority were either hesitant or reluctant and sometimes ashamed to stand before their mates as being erudite and learned. On the whole, they looked like simple, credulous fellows who were learning with difficulty and with much more effort than they spent in doing their day's work.

How It Came About

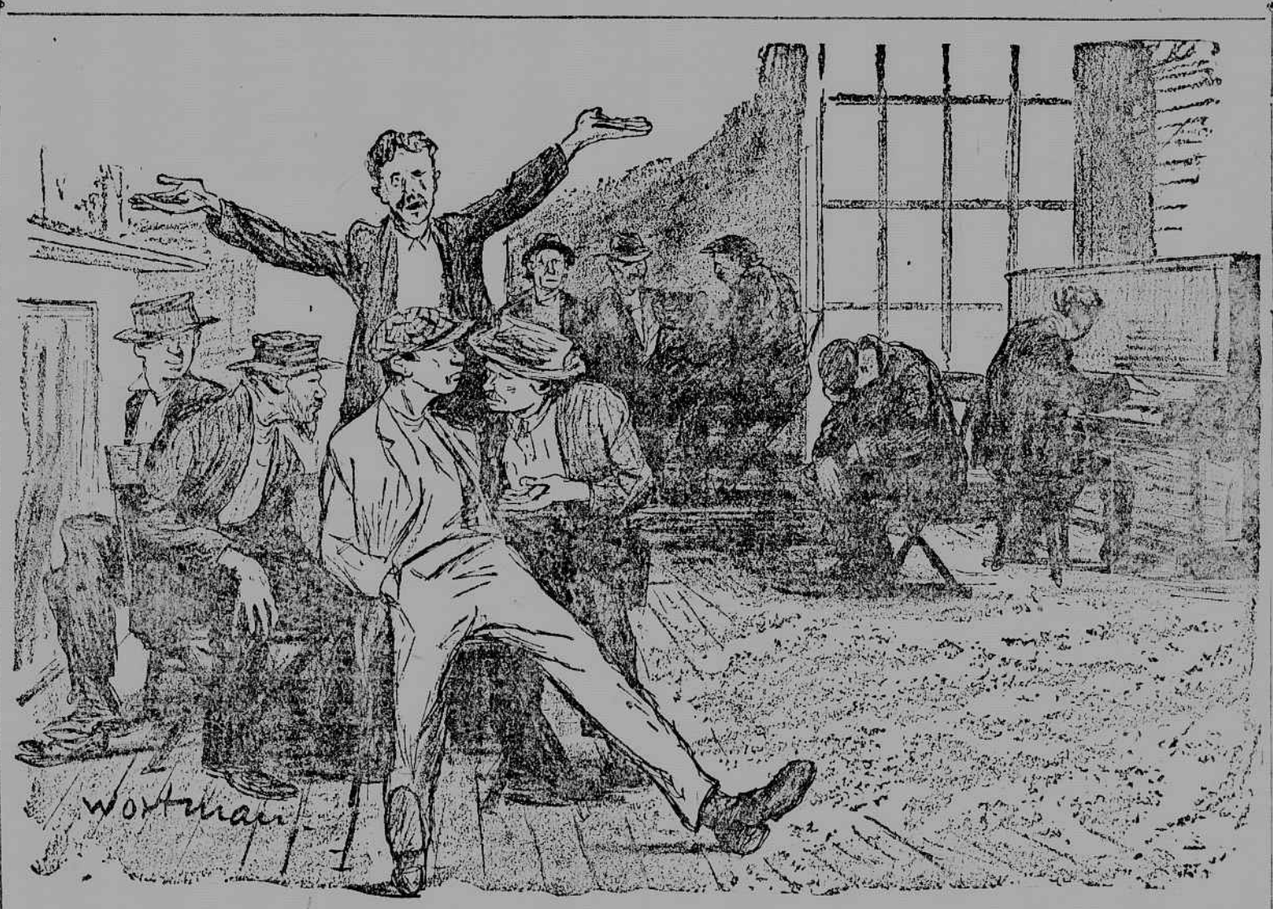
By persistent questioning the writer was able to learn later that same evening from one of the officials of the Federation how the Russian People's House came to be organized. It appears that two years ago the radical groups in the local Russian colony called a convention. This was the second convention of its kind, as one had been held previously. It was called to discuss the relationship of Russians in this country to the conscription act, and also means by which they might—those who so desired—return to their native land, Russia.

The convention was composed of elements representing all forms of radical opinion, chiefly revolutionary, and also anarchistic, but without a defined or clear policy on any one subject. Individual Russian Socialists left the convention because they thought it too radical and were unable to control it. After a number of sessions were held an organization resulted therefrom which was christened the "Russian Workers' Soviets."

Now, the elements that formed these "Soviets" are not at all partisans of L. C. A. K. Martens, the head of the Russian Soviet Bureau in this country, known to some as the Bolshevik "ambassador." They are in no way connected with Martens or his bureau, and do not approve of it because it is not sufficiently radical. It was explained by officials of the Soviet Bureau that they knew nothing of the workings of the Russian People's House and were not acquainted with its leaders.

The writer also learned that the Union of Russian Workers dominates these "Soviets." The officials who explained all this said that the programme of the Russian People's House is purely educational in its scope. Further than that he would say nothing.

As the writer made his way downstairs he passed the same large room and glanced quickly within. This time another person was at the piano, feeling out with one finger a simple Russian folksong. Two or three others sang loudly and with great fervor.



In the room sprawled roughly clad men, one of whom was snoring; in the corner stood a very worn upright piano at which sat a large, bony Russian solemnly pounding out a funereal Slavic melody

Inmates Do Not Approve of Martens and His Bureau Because They Aren't Radical Enough!

Since the Bolsheviki Are Determined to Paint Everything Red, Russian Art Is Doomed

WHILE the apologists of Bolshevism maintain that the Communist rule in Russia offers hitherto undreamed-of possibilities to the development of the liberal arts, their opponents strive to adduce proof that Leninism either stifles altogether the manifestations of the human spirit in the literary and artistic as well as the political field, or else degrades them into mere tools of its own propaganda. The following article printed in a recent number of "The New Europe," the British weekly of international politics, sheds light on the literary side of the question from the point of view of anti-Bolshevists. It is entitled "The Bolshevik Crusade Against Russian Literature," and runs:

"The Russian Liberation Committee, in No. 22 of its bulletins, published a specially instructive note upon the attitude of the Soviet government toward Russian literature. The Spanish and Roman Inquisitions used to be regarded as the supreme instance of intellectual intolerance, only rivalled by the destruction of the library of Alexandria. Future historians will demonstrate that, in this respect, the record has passed to the proletarian dictators of Moscow.

"The Bolsheviki want to remodel people after their own fashion, to make them see the world through Bolshevik eyes. For this purpose all obstacles must be removed. The first obstacles to this spiritual enslavement are books, the thoughts given to mankind by great men. And, with their usual directness, the Bolsheviki have decided to withdraw from circulation all books that are harmful from a Communistic point of view. Naturally the Gospels were the first to suffer. The basic principle of Bolshevism being 'Man is an enemy to man,' they fear the Gospel as the devil fears holy water. But they did not venture to abolish the Gospels at once. They first prohibited the issue of new editions. In number 120 of the 'Zaria,' socialistic paper, published in Omsk, there is a notice to the effect that the Council of the People's Commissaries has passed a decree that all religious and moral books should be withdrawn from libraries and private houses and burned. The decree goes on to say that the same fate awaits books that are counter-revolutionary and represent the ideals of the bourgeoisie, including the works of Karamzin, Krylov, Gribojedov, Ostrovski and Chekhov. Karamzin was an historian of the beginning of the nineteenth century; Krylov is the Russian Lafontaine, who flourished about the same time; Gribojedov and Ostrovski are two of the most celebrated dramatists of the first half of the nineteenth century. Gribojedov's famous comedy, 'Cleverness a Misfortune,' is a satire as brilliant as any of Beaumarchais. Chekhov, at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote artistic short stories, in which, at any rate, there is no laudation of the Czarist régime. Among the books to be confiscated as 'corrupting the soul of the revolutionary proletariat' are the works of Dostoievski, 'The Possessed,' and 'The Brothers Karamazov.' This decree reminds one of the mediæval Inquisition, with its Index Librorum Prohibitorum. At the same time the Bolsheviki very cleverly pretend to be the most advanced reformers. Holding a stone and a sword in their hands, they have managed to persuade the whole world that they are proffering bread and the palm branch of peace."

"The London Daily Telegraph" publishes two extracts from letters recently received in England and France, respectively, and treating of the conditions of life of the former intellectual workers of Russia under the Soviet régime. The first letter is addressed to Professor Rostovtseff, of Oxford University, by a friend of his, a former editor of a Socialist magazine. It reads:

"I was at last able to escape from the 'Socialist Millennium.' How terrible life had become during the last months I was at Petrograd you may judge from the fact that compared with it the time when you were still there seemed quite pleasant. Last autumn we were turned out of our flat and ordered to live in the basement of the same house. It had previously been occupied by some Red army men, who, finding it too dark, damp and filthy, decided that we, as 'bourgeois,' should be put into that 'box of vermin,' while they took our flat. They ordered me to gather up my things and move in two hours' time. So the children and I were compelled to live in a dark cellar with leaky walls, down which the water streamed continually, while the dry places were infested with bugs and wood-lice. The price of wood being excessively high and the cold intense, we were obliged to heat the stove with our furniture, manuscripts and even books. It is impossible to find suitable words to describe this nightmare existence. I had to get up at daybreak and run off to market to stand in queues to get our rations of frozen herring, potatoes or salt fish. Then I would come home to make the 'coffee,' made out of the sunflower-seed husks, which we took without any milk, sugar or bread. After this I was at my office till about 5 o'clock, then hurried home to cook our food, wash up, etc., and finally, toward 9 o'clock, felt so utterly done up that I could neither speak nor move. On Sundays, by way of a holiday rest, I did the washing for myself and the children. By December I began spitting blood, and in the mornings my hands and feet used to get so swollen from cold and starvation that I could scarcely move. I got so weak that my mind could only dwell on the desire for rest, no matter how or where, and I did not even care if it were forever."

The second letter, from Moscow, received at Paris, was written by a well known authoress, K——:

"I cannot describe what life in Moscow means now, not only to children, but to grown-up people also; it is not life but agony, continual obsession; one is perpetually haunted by the dream of a piece of bread and butter, of bread and salt, of a glass of milk. . . . I get up before dawn to search for provisions for myself and the children. Once I managed to obtain a little flour through the 'Writers' Society,' which was founded by the Writers' Union for obtaining provisions. M. O. Guershenson (a writer and publicist) is chairman and H. E. Efros (a publicist) secretary. I myself do all the housework, cooking and washing. The Zhilkins are in the same position. John (M. J. Zhilkin was a Socialist member of the first Duma) washes his own clothes. The other day I sent my little girl to get some flour at the 'Writers'' shop on the Smolensky Boulevard. We thought we should be the only ones, but there were quite a lot of our literary friends. We saw Marina Tzvetaiev (an author) and even the Sun-God Balmont (a well-known Russian poet) himself. . . . Our dear friend Dr. K. has died of starvation, his mother dying the day before. We have also learned of the deaths of Professors Vesselovsky, A. F. Fortunatoff and the lawyer Sakharoff. Our turn will probably come next. On the other hand, the Futurists Maiakovsky, Tatlin, C. D., and others are reaping a golden harvest. Their works are purchased by the museums at fabulous prices; and, moreover, Tatlin has received half a million rubles from the Bolsheviks for encouraging the arts; of course, no one will control the expenditure. My dear friend, do not wish to return to Moscow; that city, as well as Petrograd, is doomed to perdition. Better wear sackcloth, wooden shoes, and live in some dark corner than endure the tortures of famine we are suffering from. Our souls are filled with despair, for there is not a single ray of light, no hope for the future, and it seems as if our earthly existence must end in darkness."

Heartbroken?

BROKEN hearts are being mended in Russia now—not the hearts shattered by unfortunate romances, but the valvular organs pierced by knives. Time mends the first kind and the skilled surgeon Zelder can be depended on to operate successfully on the knife-torn heart.

Dr. Zelder has a little hospital at Obuchow. Thirty-one persons brought to the hospital with hearts pierced and slashed by knife wounds have successfully had their organs repaired and have recovered entirely, to all appearances, from their remarkable experiences. One patient has lived seven years and shows no signs of having been affected by the heart wound and subsequent sewing up.

The patients were all put under the influence of ether very soon after the injury, part of the chest wall was removed, the heart lifted from its bed and stitches quickly introduced between pulsations. The bony chest wall over the heart was not put back into place, that organ being left protected only by skin and muscle. This was done to give the heart room to expand and to prevent adhesions from embarrassing the heart's action.—*Topeka Capital.*